



Visual Diplomacy through Communication Design: The Revival of Basant 2026 in Lahore, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the 2026 revival of Basant in Lahore as a designed cultural event functioning simultaneously as cultural governance and visual diplomacy. Following a provincial ban of nearly two decades driven by safety concerns surrounding hazardous kite strings, the Government of the Punjab reintroduced Basant under a comprehensive regulatory framework integrating public safety communication, event branding, and urban scenography. Employing qualitative image-based methodology, the study analyzes how visual communication design shaped narratives of cultural heritage, governance capacity, and transnational engagement. The analytical corpus encompasses official materials, safety graphics, urban installations, and diplomatic participation imagery. A distinctive feature is the deployment of AI-generated design across official communications, evaluated on functional effectiveness and aesthetic appropriateness. Drawing on visual diplomacy scholarship and social semiotic frameworks, findings identify five design strategies: chromatic identity centered on yellow, integration of safety messaging into celebratory branding, urban festivalisation through decorative installations, staged diplomatic conviviality, and cross-platform narrative alignment managing risk history while projecting cultural vitality. The article argues that Basant 2026 expands visual diplomacy scope by demonstrating how subnational governments deploy AI-assisted communication design to generate internationally legible imagery and soft power effects while legitimizing governance through visible risk management.

Introduction

Contemporary scholarship on political communication has established that images, not text, are now the primary carriers of meaning across networked international environments, circulating with velocities and trajectories that verbal diplomacy cannot match (Bleiker, 2018; Crilly, 2020;

Manor, 2023). This visual turn raises consequential questions about how nations, regions, and cities construct and project identity through designed spectacles and strategically orchestrated cultural events. The present study addresses these questions through a case at the intersection of communication design, cultural governance, and transnational image circulation: the 2026 revival of Basant, the traditional kite-flying festival (hereafter Basant 2026), in Lahore, Pakistan.

Basant is inseparable from Lahore's civic identity. For generations, the arrival of spring filled the city's skies with colorful kites, transformed rooftops into sites of competitive flying and social gathering, and suffused streets with the yellow of blooming mustard fields. That continuity was severed when mounting fatalities linked to chemically coated kite strings prompted the Punjab government to ban the festival in 2007, rendering it legally and visually absent for nearly two decades (Dogar, 2026). An entire generation encountered Basant only through family memory and archival photographs.

The February 2026 revival is therefore far more than the resumption of a suspended folk practice. It constitutes, in Bleiker's (2018) application of Rancière's (2000) concept, a redistribution of the sensible: a reorganization of what is perceptible, permissible, and publicly visible within a political community. When the Punjab government authorized Basant's return across three designated days, February 6 to 8, 2026, under a stringent regulatory framework, it simultaneously restored a visual practice to Lahore's skyline and asserted its capacity to govern pleasure, manage risk, and project cultural vitality to domestic and international audiences. The event attracted coverage from Reuters, the Associated Press, and Al Jazeera, while images of kite-filled skies and foreign diplomats celebrating circulated widely on social media platforms (Bukhari, 2026; Hussain, 2026). This mediated visibility positions Basant 2026 as a theoretically significant case: culturally bounded yet internationally legible, tightly regulated yet visually spectacular.

A dimension of scholarly interest is the prominent role of AI-generated and AI-assisted design across official communication channels. The Government of the Punjab's official Basant 2026 website deployed AI-synthesized imagery of kite-filled skies and idealized heritage streetscapes as its primary visual identity layer. Public service announcements incorporated AI-generated graphical elements positioning safety regulations within a celebratory aesthetic register. City branding, including bus wrapping, underpass murals, and street installations, reflected design processes in which generative AI tools contributed to rapid scaling of visual assets. Promotional posters and institutional social media content featured AI-composed scenes projecting aspirational rather than documentary representations. This study evaluates each identified instance of AI-generated content on two analytical axes: functional effectiveness in serving its communicative purpose and aesthetic appropriateness relative to its cultural and institutional context. This coordinated deployment makes Basant 2026 significant not only for visual diplomacy research but for emerging scholarship on AI-mediated public communication and governance aesthetics.

The study addresses a persistent gap in visual diplomacy scholarship, which has concentrated on national foreign ministries, embassies, and international organizations as producers of diplomatic imagery (Manor, 2019; Crilley, 2020). Comparatively little attention has been directed toward how subnational governments stage image events that circulate beyond their jurisdictions and shape national reputation. This oversight matters because, as place branding scholarship demonstrates, cultural capitals frequently function as metonymic proxies for national identity (Anholt, 2010). Images of Lahore celebrating Basant carry implications for how international publics perceive Pakistan more broadly.

The study analyzes Basant 2026 as an instance of subnational visual diplomacy enacted through communication design, treating designed artifacts as structured meaning-making resources whose

formal properties shape interpretation and enable circulation (Machin, 2013; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021).

Research Question

1. How did the Punjab government deploy visual communication design as an instrument of subnational visual diplomacy in Basant 2026 to construct soft power narratives and legitimize governance?

Research Objectives

1. To identify the visual communication design strategies deployed across Basant 2026 promotional materials, safety graphics, urban installations, and digital platforms.
2. To examine how semiotic and compositional choices narrated Basant as a heritage revival rather than a disorderly risk.
3. To analyze how safety regulations were aestheticized within celebratory design to render governance legible and shareable across platforms.
4. To investigate how AI-generated imagery and staged diplomatic encounters reframed the festival for domestic and international audiences, assessing both the functional effectiveness and aesthetic appropriateness of AI-generated materials.
5. To extend visual diplomacy theory to subnational actors by demonstrating how communication design functions as a structured instrument of soft power and governance legitimization.

The central argument is that Basant 2026 functioned as a state-curated reemergence of a culturally significant visual practice, engineered to be seen, shared, and interpreted in ways that simultaneously projected soft power and legitimized governance. Five interlocking strategies accomplished this: chromatic identity construction using yellow as a polysemic signifier of renewal; integration of safety messaging into celebratory aesthetics; urban festivalisation through systematic decorative intervention and AI-assisted design scaling; staged diplomatic conviviality generating endorsement imagery; and cross-platform narrative alignment managing risk history while projecting cultural vitality.

Literature Review

Visual Diplomacy and Digital Public Diplomacy

Visuality has assumed increasing centrality within public diplomacy as political communication migrates into media ecologies where images travel faster than policy texts and where audiences assess credibility through what appears visible, embodied, and shareable. Crilley et al. (2020) conceptualize visual public diplomacy through a tripartite model emphasizing production, circulation, and reception. Production concerns how images are deliberately created for particular narrative purposes; circulation addresses how images move through networks, platforms, and media systems; and reception examines how diverse publics interpret visual content, often in ways that diverge from producers' intentions. This framework proves especially useful for analyzing festivals because a festival's political significance frequently depends on photographs and videos that travel far beyond the physical event, generating impressions among audiences who will never attend in person.

Manor's (2019) scholarship on digital public diplomacy similarly foregrounds the narrative capacity of images. Digitalization, Manor argues, has fundamentally reconfigured diplomatic institutions and their relationships with audiences, increasing the importance of platform literacies and visual storytelling competencies among diplomatic practitioners. Research on mediatized diplomacy also demonstrates that images can powerfully support or undermine linguistic framing,

legitimizing or delegitimizing institutional narratives depending on what they render visible (Crilley, 2020).

Recent scholarship has begun to interrogate how AI-generated imagery intersects with the production and circulation dimensions of visual diplomacy. Synthesized visuals can produce aspirational representations of place that exceed what photojournalistic capture alone can achieve, yet they simultaneously introduce vulnerabilities around authenticity and credibility if AI origins are detected by audiences or rival media systems. Existing frameworks, including Crilley et al.'s (2020) production-circulation-reception model, assume a degree of ontological stability in images under analysis: photographs are understood as indexical traces of real events, and their diplomatic function depends partly on that indexicality. AI-generated imagery disrupts this assumption in ways that visual diplomacy scholarship has not yet fully theorized.

Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy, and Festivals

Nye's (2011) foundational concept of soft power, defined as the capacity to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion, identifies culture as a principal resource when it appears meaningful, authentic, and admirable to foreign publics. Contemporary cultural diplomacy scholarship refines this framework by emphasizing that attraction proves most sustainable when accompanied by credibility, reciprocity, and opportunities for genuine dialogue rather than one-directional projection (Grincheva, 2024). UNESCO (2023) positions cultural diplomacy as a mode of engagement that supports sustainable development when it enables access, exchange, and mutual recognition rather than mere nation branding.

Festivals occupy a distinctive position within cultural diplomacy because they are simultaneously public, embodied, temporally bounded, and symbolically dense. A festival condenses visual, sonic, and spatial signs legible to international audiences even without extensive contextual knowledge: colors, movement, gathered crowds, and celebratory atmosphere communicate across linguistic barriers. Comparative cases illuminate how states leverage festivals for soft power objectives. Madani (2022) analyzed Saudi Arabia's MDL Beast music festival through Instagram framing analysis, identifying dominant frames of national transformation, cultural opening, and positive change. El-Dabt et al. (2025) examined Qatar's FIFA World Cup nation-branding strategies, developing frameworks for understanding how mega-events project national identity. These cases demonstrate that festival-derived soft power operates through image circulation as much as through direct experience.

Festivalisation research also documents tensions in festival governance. Cudny (2016) and Smith et al. (2022) show that cities use festivals to reshape public space and participation patterns while stimulating tourism and investment. Johansson and Kociatkiewicz (2011) apply Bakhtin's (1984) concept of the carnivalesque to urban festivals, examining how the liberatory potential of carnival coexists with controlled image production and managed spectacle. This tension proves central to Basant 2026, where the festival's spirit of spontaneous rooftop competition was reintroduced within a framework of QR-coded kites, drone surveillance, zoning systems, and mandatory registrations.

Communication Design, Social Semiotics, and Multimodality

The analytical approach draws on social semiotic frameworks that treat images and designed artifacts as structured meaning-making resources rather than transparent windows onto reality. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) visual grammar provides systematic categories for analyzing representational choices, including participants, actions, settings, and their relations; interactive meanings, including how images position viewers through gaze, distance, and angle; and compositional meanings, including how elements are arranged through salience, framing, and

information value. Applied to Basant visuals, representational analysis examines whether the festival appears as family ritual, competitive sport, commercial marketplace, or diplomatic occasion. Interactive analysis considers whether imagery positions viewers as distant observers through aerial drone shots or invites emotional identification through intimate close-ups. Compositional analysis addresses how color, typography, and layout direct attention to particular elements.

Multimodal critical discourse analysis extends these tools by connecting design features to power relations and ideological formations. Machin (2013) argues that discourses are legitimized not only through language but through the integrated deployment of visuals, typography, sound, and spatial arrangement. In the Basant case, the visual design of regulatory notices and the aesthetic design of celebration become mutually constitutive: the festival's political legitimacy depends on visible performance of governance, while governance becomes more publicly acceptable when embedded within celebratory aesthetics.

AI-Generated Design in Public Communication

The emergence of generative AI as a tool in public sector visual communication represents a significant development for scholarship at the intersection of design studies and political communication. Research documents that generative AI is increasingly integrated within creative workflows, raising consequential questions about authorship, control, and institutional values as humans and AI systems co-create public visual content (Hertzmänn & Epstein, 2023). Studies on AI-generated visual content demonstrate that audience response depends significantly on whether images are perceived as authentic and whether their synthetic origins are disclosed, with undisclosed AI generation associated with erosion of trust when detected (Nightingale & Farid, 2022). This makes disclosure and provenance governance central to public sector use, particularly in contexts where AI-generated imagery depicts heritage sites, public figures, or culturally sensitive practices.

For institutions deploying AI-generated design in diplomacy-adjacent communication, the implications are layered. Generative AI enables rapid scaling of visual assets across formats and platforms, supporting message consistency and aesthetic coherence at speeds that traditional design workflows cannot match. However, evaluating such outputs requires attention to two distinct dimensions. The first is functional effectiveness: whether the AI-generated material achieves its intended communicative purpose, such as conveying regulatory information clearly, establishing visual identity coherently across platforms, or producing imagery legible to cross-cultural audiences. The second is aesthetic appropriateness: whether the visual qualities of AI-generated content align with the cultural register, institutional tone, and heritage sensitivities of the context in which it is deployed. An AI-generated image may be functionally effective in attracting attention while being aesthetically incongruent with the vernacular visual traditions it purports to represent. This dual-axis evaluation is adopted in the present study as a systematic lens for assessing AI-generated materials across the Basant 2026 corpus.

Simultaneously, AI-generated visuals carry inherent tensions around indexicality. Images that appear photographic but are synthetically produced occupy an ambiguous position in the trust economy of public communication. When such imagery circulates within the same media ecosystem as documentary photography, audiences and journalists may lack adequate signals for distinguishing aspirational representation from factual documentation. Bleiker's (2018) theoretical framework for visual global politics, which locates political significance in the redistribution of what is rendered perceptible, is directly relevant: AI-generated imagery does not merely supplement the sensible world but actively constructs an aspirational version of it.

Methodology

The study is positioned within interpretivist epistemology, treating meaning as co-constructed through the interaction between designed artifacts and the analytical frameworks brought to bear on them. It employs a qualitative approach using single case study design, consistent with Yin's (2018) framework for bounded, contextually embedded inquiry. Basant 2026 in Lahore constitutes a bounded case occurring over a defined three-day period within a specific administrative jurisdiction while generating extensive designed artifacts and mediated imagery across multiple platforms and media systems. The analytical aim is interpretive: to identify visual communication design strategies, examine their semiotic and discursive functions, and situate them within visual diplomacy theory.

The corpus was constructed through theoretically informed purposive sampling across five categories of visual material. The first category comprised official government-produced content, including the festival anthem and music video released through Alhamra Lahore, public service announcement graphics circulated through government social media accounts, content published on the official Basant 2026 government website, and safety regulation infographics distributed through official channels. The second category encompassed urban and environmental documentation, including photographs of Liberty Chowk installations, bus-wrapping imagery, underpass murals, and street decoration across the Walled City. The third category included news media visuals from domestic outlets including Dawn, Express Tribune, and The Nation, and international outlets including *Reuters*, the *Associated Press*, *Al Jazeera*, and *CNN*. The fourth category comprised institutional social media content from provincial government accounts, the Punjab Safe City Authority, and participating diplomatic missions. The fifth category included wire service photography specifically documenting diplomatic participation events at Delhi Gate and rooftop venues, selected for its focus on staged diplomatic encounters as a distinct subcorpus.

Analytical procedures combined social semiotic visual analysis using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) categories with reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2025) approach, operationalized through the procedural steps demonstrated in Byrne (2023). The final analytical corpus comprised approximately 85 items distributed across the five sampling categories: 22 official government-produced graphics and web assets, 18 urban and environmental photographs, 24 news media visuals from domestic and international outlets, 12 institutional social media posts, and 9 wire service photographs of diplomatic participation. Semiotic analysis was applied at the level of individual corpus items, examining representational choices, interactive positioning of viewers, compositional organization, and chromatic and typographic systems. The thematic stage followed a reflexive six-phase process of familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Themes were generated inductively and subsequently interpreted through Crilly et al.'s (2020) production-circulation-reception lens, ensuring that the thematic structure remained grounded in empirical observation while maintaining theoretical coherence with the study's analytical framework.

Each corpus item was additionally assessed for visual indicators associated with AI-generated image production, including hyper-saturated chromatic fields, implausible spatial arrangements, and architectural rendering characteristic of diffusion-model synthesis. Where AI generation was identified, the material was evaluated on two axes. Functional effectiveness was assessed by examining whether the AI-generated content fulfilled its communicative purpose: clarity of regulatory information, coherence of visual identity across platforms, and legibility for cross-cultural audiences. Aesthetic appropriateness was assessed by examining whether the visual qualities of AI-generated content aligned with the cultural register, vernacular visual traditions, and institutional tone of the Basant revival context. This identification was based on observational

analytical judgment rather than computational verification procedures, a constraint acknowledged as a methodological limitation.

Reflexivity is maintained through transparent documentation of analytical procedures and explicit acknowledgment of the study's focus on institutional production, which precludes direct access to reception processes. Ethical considerations are addressed by using publicly available visual materials and institutional social media content while avoiding identification of private individuals depicted in publicly circulated imagery. A further limitation is the absence of publicly available information regarding the specific design agencies, in-house teams, or freelance practitioners who produced the campaign's visual materials, and the extent to which generative AI tools were integrated into their workflows. The analysis therefore addresses design outputs as institutional artifacts rather than attributing them to identified creative practitioners.

Findings

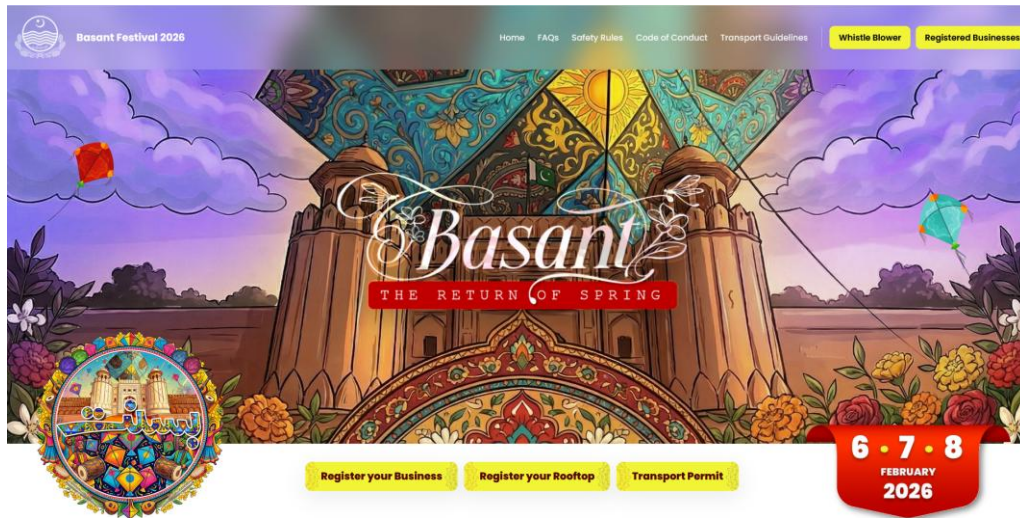
Chromatic Identity and the Semiotics of Yellow

The first and most visible strategy was the stabilization of a coherent chromatic identity. Across official interfaces, promotional graphics, decorative surfaces, and clothing associated with ceremonial participation, yellow emerged as the dominant signifier of the revived festival. This choice condensed several registers simultaneously: springtime agricultural memory, traditional basanti attire, sunlight, optimism, and civic festivity. By consistently foregrounding yellow, the campaign gave dispersed materials a recognizable identity system linking heritage to state-managed renewal.

The official portal is an instructive starting point. Its visual field leaned heavily on yellow-dominant skies, luminous architectural backdrops, and kite imagery arranged for immediate readability. Whether these scenes were fully generated or extensively edited, they displayed a level of polish and atmospheric consistency more typical of synthetic or heavily composed visual workflows than of unprocessed documentary photography.

Assessed on the dual axes introduced in the methodology, the website imagery demonstrates notable functional effectiveness. It establishes an instantly recognizable visual identity, communicates the festival's celebratory register before any text is read, and produces a tonally unified landing experience across devices. The chromatic consistency of the yellow palette ensures that the portal functions as a coherent brand touchpoint, orienting first-time visitors and international audiences toward a positive affective register. However, the aesthetic appropriateness of these visuals warrants more qualified assessment. The hyper-saturated luminosity and idealized architectural rendering project an aspirational Lahore that, while visually striking, diverges from the textured, layered visual character of the city's actual streetscapes and vernacular kite-flying culture. The resulting imagery reads as polished destination branding rather than as a representation rooted in the specific material and sensory qualities of Basant as a lived tradition. This divergence does not negate the imagery's communicative utility, but it does indicate a tension between functional efficiency and cultural fidelity that recurs across the corpus.

Figure 1: Official Basant Festival 2026 web interface.



Note. Screenshot from the Basant Festival 2026 portal (Government of the Punjab, 2026). The imagery displays characteristics consistent with AI-generated or AI-enhanced visual production.

From a social semiotic perspective, yellow also structured viewer orientation. Because it repeatedly occupied large background fields and high-salience areas, it functioned as an anchoring device stabilizing otherwise varied scenes. Kites, text overlays, and architectural motifs could differ across assets, but the recurrence of yellow helped viewers recognize them as belonging to one campaign ecology. That continuity is central to visual diplomacy because it increases mnemonic retention. Audiences may forget specific messages, yet they often remember the overall look that made an event feel singular and coherent.

The same chromatic discipline extended into transport branding, posters, and urban decorative clusters. Rather than relying on vernacular color abundance alone, the campaign repeatedly channeled attention toward a narrowed palette that made the festival appear coherent across formats. Color was performing narrative work usually assigned to slogans, quietly translating a potentially contentious revival into a stable visual promise of celebration under governance.

Safety as Civic Aesthetics

A second strategy was the aestheticization of safety. Basant had long been associated with danger because of injuries caused by hazardous strings and unregulated rooftop practices. The 2026 revival therefore depended on persuading the public that enjoyment and regulation could coexist. Instead of presenting rules as visually alien to festivity, official materials embedded instructions within the same celebratory palette and iconographic environment as promotional content. Safety became part of the event's aesthetic language rather than an interruption of it.

This design move was consequential. Conventionally, regulatory communication relies on warning colors, bureaucratic layouts, and terse prohibitive wording. In the Basant campaign, by contrast, instructions about approved strings, trader registration, rooftop precautions, and vehicle safety were framed through decorative motifs, softened chromatic transitions, and festival-adjacent imagery. The result was not a disappearance of authority but a reframing of authority as civic care. Regulation appeared less as a punitive limit on pleasure and more as the enabling condition for a legitimate, modern, and defensible revival.

Figure 2: Official safety communication integrated into the festival's visual identity.



Note. Safety-related public service announcements with regulatory instruction embedded within the celebratory design system. Several graphics display visual characteristics consistent with AI-generated or AI-enhanced production.

Evaluated on the dual axes of functional effectiveness and aesthetic appropriateness, the safety graphics present a mixed but largely successful profile. Functionally, they achieve their primary communicative objective: regulatory information is legible, hierarchically organized, and visually distinguished from purely promotional content while remaining recognizably part of the same campaign ecology. The use of consistent iconography, clear typographic hierarchy, and color-coded categorization of rules ensures that instructions can be parsed quickly across literacy levels and screen sizes. This functional achievement is significant given the life-safety stakes involved; the campaign needed to communicate binding legal requirements without the visual austerity that might cause audiences to disengage. On the axis of aesthetic appropriateness, the safety graphics perform more successfully than the website imagery analyzed in Theme 1. Because their purpose is explicitly instructional, the polished, high-contrast visual treatment characteristic of AI-assisted production aligns naturally with the genre expectations of infographic communication. The celebratory framing does not undermine the regulatory content but rather contextualizes it within a visual environment that audiences were already engaging with voluntarily. Where aesthetic tension does emerge is in the softer, more decorative safety materials that risk blurring the boundary between advisory and ornamental content, potentially reducing the perceived urgency of specific prohibitions.

Equally important was the balance between directive force and visual softness. Official instructions still prohibited certain materials and behaviors, but the communication rarely relied on the harsh visual codes of emergency warning. Rules were nested within rounded forms, decorative

edges, or image fields already associated with celebration, softening the transition between command and invitation. In design terms, the campaign reduced friction between pleasure and compliance. In political terms, it made regulation appear culturally aligned rather than externally imposed.

The anthem and related video materials reinforced this integration. Auditory celebration was paired with visual reminders that lawful conduct was part of what made the return possible. Text, song, image, color, and pacing worked together to convert a legal regime into a culturally resonant message. Basant was being narrated not as a reckless past restored in full, but as a tradition selectively reformatted for contemporary governance conditions.

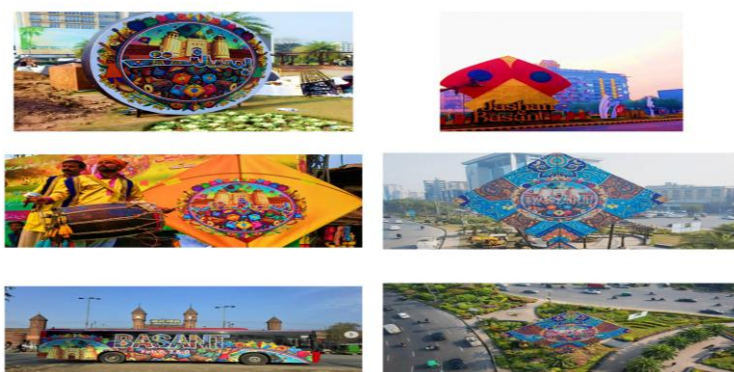
Urban Festivalisation and City Branding

A third strategy involved urban festivalisation. The revival depended not only on media graphics but on the transformation of Lahore into a visibly branded environment. Decorative lighting, street-level installations, transport wrapping, and localized visual intensification in high-profile zones converted ordinary infrastructure into a temporary event surface. The city itself became part of the communication campaign.

This transformation served two functions. First, it increased experiential density for participants by making the festival perceptible beyond rooftop activity. Second, it gave cameras more to document. Streets, buses, intersections, and heritage zones became ready-made backdrops for photographs and video clips, expanding the campaign's capacity to generate shareable content. From the perspective of festivalisation research, this is a classic case of urban space being temporarily re-scripted through design so that celebration and city branding reinforce one another.

The urban branding materials constitute the most spatially distributed instance of AI-assisted design in the corpus and warrant evaluation on both analytical axes. Functionally, the strategy was effective in achieving its primary objective: converting Lahore's built environment into a legible, photographable event surface that extended the festival's visibility beyond designated kite-flying zones. The repetition of consistent motifs across buses, underpasses, and street furniture created a networked visual grammar that oriented residents and visitors alike, signaling that the festival was administratively coordinated and citywide in scope. The rapid scaling required to brand transport vehicles, paint murals, and install decorative clusters across geographically dispersed locations within a compressed production timeline indicates a workflow in which generative AI tools contributed to asset multiplication and format adaptation. This scaling function represents a significant communicative achievement, as it ensured visual consistency across dozens of physical touchpoints that would have been difficult to coordinate through conventional design processes alone.

Figure 3: Urban branding and decorated public spaces.





Note. City-scale visual materials including transport branding, decorative installations, and festivalised streetscapes. Several elements display visual characteristics consistent with AI-assisted design scaling.

On the axis of aesthetic appropriateness, the urban materials present the most varied profile in the corpus. Installations that drew on recognizable folk motifs, such as kite shapes, floral patterns, and traditional color blocking, achieved stronger cultural resonance than those that relied on generic celebratory imagery with no specific connection to Basant's visual heritage. Some bus wraps and street graphics reproduced the hyper-saturated, tonally uniform quality observed in the website imagery, projecting a polished but culturally nonspecific festivity. Others, particularly physical installations incorporating three-dimensional kite forms and marigold garlands, achieved a closer alignment with the tactile, layered aesthetic of vernacular Basant celebration. The variation suggests that AI-assisted design scaling was most aesthetically appropriate when guided by culturally specific visual references and least appropriate when defaulting to generalized celebratory templates.

The spatial layer of the campaign also reactivated Lahore's heritage imagery in a selective way. By foregrounding visually recognizable urban nodes and architecturally resonant settings, the revival linked Basant to an older civic imaginary while presenting that imaginary through contemporary branding techniques. The result was not simple nostalgia but a curated historicity in which the past was made available through present-day design systems, helping the festival appear rooted and modern simultaneously, a combination especially useful for soft power narratives.

Urban interventions also redistributed spectatorship. Not everyone needed to participate directly in kite flying to become part of the festival's visual public. Residents, commuters, journalists, and online viewers could encounter Basant through branded streetscapes and decorated transit routes. This widened the event's observational audience and helped transform the revival into a citywide media condition rather than a narrowly bounded pastime. In diplomatic terms, that enlargement increased the number of visually persuasive entry points through which the festival could be understood by international audiences.

Diplomatic Conviviality and Endorsement Imagery

The fourth strategy was the visual scripting of diplomatic conviviality. Images of foreign representatives learning kite-flying techniques, wearing yellow attire, and participating in celebratory spaces gave the event a powerful layer of symbolic endorsement. These images mattered because they externalized approval, making the festival appear not solely as a domestic revival but as a culturally attractive event capable of welcoming and impressing international observers (Crilley, 2020; Manor, 2023).

The diplomatic images were effective not because they documented policy statements but because they translated diplomacy into an easily readable social scene. Shared activity, smiling interaction, traditional color coordination, and embodied participation rendered cross-cultural contact visible in a non-confrontational idiom. The representational structure was important: officials appeared alongside local hosts within an atmosphere of informality, reducing distance and presenting the provincial administration as confident, hospitable, and socially fluent. Such scenes are particularly potent in visual diplomacy because they circulate as condensed signs of legitimacy without requiring audiences to parse institutional detail (Crilley, 2020).

Figure 4: Diplomatic participation as endorsement and cultural exchange.



Note. News images showing visiting diplomats participating in Basant-related activities in Lahore. These images are primarily photojournalistic rather than AI-generated, though they circulated alongside AI-produced promotional content across official social media channels.

Unlike the materials analyzed in the preceding themes, the diplomatic participation imagery was predominantly photojournalistic in origin rather than AI-generated. This distinction carries analytical significance. The endorsement value of diplomatic imagery depends heavily on perceived authenticity: a photograph of an ambassador flying a kite communicates genuine engagement in a way that an AI-synthesized equivalent could not. The indexical quality of these images, their status as traces of an event that actually occurred, is precisely what makes them diplomatically functional. In this respect, the diplomatic subcorpus represents the point in the campaign where photographic indexicality remained indispensable and where AI generation would have undermined rather than enhanced communicative purpose.

However, the circulation context complicates this assessment. Diplomatic photographs were disseminated through the same official social media channels and institutional accounts that also published AI-generated promotional content. When photojournalistic and AI-generated images occupy the same distribution environment without clear provenance markers, the indexical credibility of authentic documentary images may be affected by proximity to synthetic content. This observation extends the dual-axis framework by identifying a case where functional effectiveness depends not only on the properties of individual images but on the composition of the visual ecosystem in which they circulate.

Sartorial choices amplified the endorsement effect. When diplomatic visitors appeared in yellow or in visually coordinated festival-appropriate clothing, the images communicated participation through embodied alignment rather than verbal declaration. Dress functioned as a low-verbal but high-visibility sign of respect, adaptation, and willingness to enter a local symbolic order (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). Such cues are easy to overlook, yet they are analytically significant because they transform mere attendance into a recognizable image of endorsement.

These images remained carefully staged in terms of their ceremonial legibility. Diplomatic presence was framed within culturally recognizable motifs rather than within bureaucratic protocol

settings, shifting the representational emphasis from formal statecraft to convivial contact. Diplomacy was performed through participation in local ritual, making the event useful for outward-facing reputation work even in the absence of explicit diplomatic messaging. This aligns with Manor and Crilley's (2023) argument that mediatized diplomacy increasingly depends on visual narratives of relational warmth rather than institutional formality.

Platformed Circulation and Narrative Alignment

The fifth strategy was platform-aware circulation. The campaign's visual force did not end with production; it depended on the movement of selected images across official channels, news coverage, and social media environments. What mattered most was not measurable algorithmic output, which cannot be established from public materials alone, but the design of assets for portability. High contrast, simplified visual hierarchy, emotionally legible scenes, and repeatable motifs made the campaign easy to screenshot, repost, and narratively align across platforms (van Dijck, 2013).

This circulation did not eliminate interpretive differences. News organizations retained editorial autonomy, and some coverage foregrounded economic activity, others cultural nostalgia, and others the tension between festivity and security (Bukhari, 2026; Dogar, 2026; Hussain, 2026). Yet despite those differences, a relatively stable visual grammar persisted across coverage: kite-filled skies, concentrated yellow, crowded rooftops, and scenes of visible enjoyment. This continuity suggests that the campaign successfully supplied a set of strong image anchors that helped structure the wider story even when individual outlets framed the event differently. In Crilley et al.'s (2020) terms, the production stage was designed with circulation in mind, embedding formal properties that increased the probability of narrative coherence across decentralized media environments.

Cross-platform repetition also helped manage the festival's contested history. Because Basant had long been associated with risk, the campaign needed a visual story strong enough to prevent the event from being defined solely by memory of prohibition. The repeated circulation of bright skies, controlled festivity, and rule-bound celebration supplied that counter-frame. It did not erase the past but offered a more immediate and image-rich narrative for contemporary audiences. The politics of circulation therefore lay not only in visibility but in which visual associations became easiest to recall.

The role of AI-generated and AI-enhanced materials in this circulation ecology warrants specific evaluation. Across the corpus, materials identified as AI-generated or AI-assisted consistently displayed formal properties optimized for platform circulation: high chromatic saturation, clean compositional geometry, and minimal visual noise. Assessed on the axis of functional effectiveness, these properties represent a significant communicative advantage. AI-generated assets were formatted for legibility at reduced screen sizes, maintained visual coherence when cropped or reframed by third-party accounts, and retained their affective register across the compression artifacts introduced by successive platform sharing. In this respect, AI-assisted production did not merely accelerate asset creation but produced outputs whose formal qualities were inherently suited to the distributional logics of contemporary social media platforms.

On the axis of aesthetic appropriateness, however, the same optimization introduces a paradox. The visual cleanliness and chromatic intensity that made AI-generated materials platform-ready simultaneously distanced them from the sensory texture of Basant as a lived experience. Documentary photography of the festival captured atmospheric haze, uneven lighting, crowded and visually cluttered rooftops, and the material imperfections of handmade kites. AI-generated counterparts projected a version of the same event that was more luminous, more symmetrical, and

more tonally controlled than any embodied encounter could produce. When both categories of imagery circulated within the same feeds and timelines, the aesthetic gap between aspirational projection and documentary record became visible, raising questions about how audiences reconcile these competing visual registers. This tension does not invalidate the campaign's circulation strategy, but it does identify a point where functional optimization and cultural authenticity operate in partial tension, a dynamic likely to intensify as AI-generated content becomes more prevalent in public sector communication.

Discussion

Visual Diplomacy Through Designed Spectacle

The findings reveal Basant 2026 as a case illuminating how communication design can serve visual diplomacy objectives at the subnational level while simultaneously legitimizing governance through visible risk management. The production-circulation-reception framework articulated by Crilley et al. (2020) proves highly applicable. At the production stage, the Punjab government created deliberate visual content designed for narrative purposes linking heritage, modernity, and openness. Circulation occurred through official channels and through amplification by international wire services, broadcast media, and user-generated content. Reception, while not directly measurable in this study, can be inferred from media framing patterns showing both alignment with and divergence from intended narratives.

The semiotic architecture of the campaign consistently narrated Basant as a heritage revival rather than a disorderly risk. Yellow functioned as a polysemic signifier condensing agricultural memory, traditional attire, and civic optimism into a coherent chromatic identity. Compositional choices across the corpus positioned the festival within orderly, aesthetically governed visual fields, while decorative installations and branded streetscapes linked contemporary celebration to an older civic imaginary through curated historicity rather than unmediated nostalgia (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). These semiotic strategies collectively reframed a previously banned practice as culturally rooted, administratively managed, and internationally presentable.

Particularly significant is the demonstration that provincial governments can participate meaningfully in visual diplomacy without depending on national foreign ministries or embassy infrastructure. By staging a culturally resonant, visually spectacular event that attracted international media and diplomatic participation, the Punjab government generated images circulating beyond Pakistan's borders and contributing to national reputation formation (Crilley, 2020; Manor, 2023). Anholt's (2010) observation that cultural capitals function as metonymic proxies for national identity finds direct empirical support: images of Lahore celebrating Basant carried implications for how international publics perceived Pakistan more broadly.

AI-Generated Design and the Mediation of Visual Diplomacy

The dual-axis evaluation reveals a consistent pattern. AI-generated and AI-assisted materials demonstrated strong functional effectiveness across virtually all deployment contexts: website imagery established coherent brand identity, safety graphics maintained regulatory legibility within celebratory framing, urban branding achieved visual consistency across dozens of touchpoints, and platform-circulated content retained affective register across compression and reframing.

Aesthetic appropriateness, by contrast, varied systematically. The evaluation identified a gradient ranging from strong cultural alignment in safety infographics, through mixed performance in urban installations where culturally specific folk motifs achieved greater resonance than generic templates, to notable divergence in website and social media imagery whose hyper-saturated luminosity departed from the sensory character of Basant as a lived tradition. This gradient

suggests that aesthetic suitability depends on the degree to which production processes are guided by culturally specific visual references rather than generalized stylistic defaults.

This finding carries direct theoretical implications. Existing visual diplomacy frameworks treat photographs as indexical traces of real events whose diplomatic function depends partly on that indexicality (Bleiker, 2018; Crilley, 2020). AI-generated imagery disrupts this assumption. The diplomatic photographs analyzed in Figure 4 demonstrated that indexical authenticity remains indispensable for endorsement imagery, while AI-generated materials across the other figures demonstrated that synthesized visuals can effectively perform branding, regulatory, and circulation functions where indexicality is less critical. Visual diplomacy theory therefore requires differentiation between image functions depending on indexical authenticity and those depending on semiotic coherence.

Beyond its semiotic and diplomatic implications, the deployment of AI-assisted design carries significant production economy considerations for communication design practice. The scale of the Basant 2026 campaign, spanning a government website, dozens of safety infographics, transport wrapping across a metropolitan bus fleet, underpass murals, street-level installations, and a continuous stream of social media assets, would typically require months of design production and substantial budgetary allocation for creative agencies, photography commissions, and print coordination. AI-assisted workflows compressed this production cycle by enabling rapid generation, adaptation, and format multiplication of visual assets from a limited set of design parameters. For a subnational government operating within the fiscal constraints characteristic of provincial administrations in developing economies, this cost efficiency is not incidental but structurally enabling: it expanded the communicative reach of the campaign beyond what conventional design procurement could have achieved within the same timeline and budget. The Basant 2026 case therefore suggests that AI-assisted design may democratize access to large-scale visual communication campaigns for resource-constrained public sector actors, though this efficiency gain must be weighed against the aesthetic and authenticity trade-offs identified in the preceding analysis. Future research should examine the precise cost differentials between AI-assisted and conventional design workflows in comparable public sector campaigns to establish whether the Basant pattern generalizes across institutional contexts.

Design as Governance and Persuasion

The integration of safety messaging into celebratory aesthetics represents a sophisticated design strategy. Rather than positioning safety and celebration as separate communicative domains, the campaign embedded regulatory content within festive forms, rendering governance legible as civic care rather than punitive restriction. Preliminary media reports suggest a reduced incidence of string-related fatalities compared with prior revival attempts, though official epidemiological data remain pending (Bukhari, 2026; Hussain, 2026). Attributing any improvement solely to communication design rather than enforcement infrastructure, drone surveillance, or behavioral change remains analytically complex.

Limitations

The festival occurred during a period in which broader security concerns in Punjab received international media attention, and some coverage situated festival imagery within that wider context (Bukhari, 2026; Hussain, 2026). This illustrates that visual diplomacy events operate within news ecologies beyond organizers' control.

The study's focus on institutional production cannot account for reception diversity, and future research employing reception interviews, digital ethnography, and platform engagement analytics

could complement this approach. A reception study conducted after a subsequent edition of Basant would be particularly valuable for assessing whether the visual strategies identified here produced measurable shifts in international audience perceptions. Future work may also examine how commercialization, platform circulation, and evolving safety enforcement shape participation across social groups and across future editions of the festival. Additionally, comparative casualty data across eras rely largely on media reports and official submissions rather than systematic epidemiological surveillance, which limits the precision of cross-temporal comparison.

Conclusion

This study examined how the Government of the Punjab deployed visual communication design as an instrument of subnational visual diplomacy in the 2026 revival of Basant, yielding three contributions.

The methodological contribution of the dual-axis evaluation framework, assessing AI-generated materials for functional effectiveness and aesthetic appropriateness, offers a replicable tool for future studies on AI-mediated public communication. It moves scholarly discussion beyond binary judgments of AI-generated content as authentic or inauthentic, offering a differentiated vocabulary for assessing how well such content serves communicative and cultural purposes simultaneously.

The second contribution is theoretical. The analysis identified a distinction that existing visual diplomacy frameworks do not accommodate: the difference between image functions depending on indexical authenticity and those depending on semiotic coherence. As AI-generated imagery becomes prevalent in public sector communication, this distinction will become essential for understanding visual diplomacy in media environments where synthesized and documentary images coexist without provenance markers.

The third is applied. The case provides evidence that subnational governments can operate as effective visual diplomacy actors when communication design integrates chromatic identity, aestheticized regulation, urban branding, diplomatic staging, and platform-aware circulation as a coherent system rather than as isolated tactics.

Whether circulated imagery shifted international perceptions, whether future iterations achieve greater socioeconomic accessibility, and whether AI-generated content enhances or erodes diplomatic credibility are questions requiring longitudinal and reception-centered research beyond the scope of this study. Basant 2026 marks a moment when a city sought to rewrite its visual identity through designed spectacle, demonstrating both the power and the unresolved tensions of AI-assisted communication design as an instrument of cultural governance and transnational image-making.

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